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Lifelong Learning and Higher Education in Europe 1995-2013: Widening and/or Narrowing Access?

Sheila Riddell, Elisabet Weedon and John Holford

Introduction

This special issue examines how social equity of access to higher education in Europe has changed over the fifteen years since the European Union adopted lifelong learning as a key policy theme (CEC 1994; European Year of LLL 1996, formation of DG-XXII 1995). This 'era of lifelong learning' has coincided with two major geo-political developments: first, the resurgence of capitalism in post-socialist eastern and central Europe; and second, the period of rapid enlargement of the EU, from 12 member states and 350 million people in 1994 to 27 member states and over 500 million people by 2007. The EU's new member states lie chiefly in eastern and southern Europe and have varied histories (post-communist and/or post-colonial). Many are quite small, with 12 of the EU's 27 member states having populations smaller than that of London. Of the new member states, Poland, with a population of 38m, is the largest, and Malta, with 400,000, is the smallest. European enlargement also coincided with, and was arguably driven by, the intensification of 'globalisation' (economic, social, technological), and ideologies of the 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge society'. Knowledge economy ideologies were often linked with theories and ideologies of neoliberalism and their privileging of market-based policies (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Knowledge economy discourses often promoted deficit views of workers with low skills and qualifications, seeing them as the authors of their own misfortune, rather than as victims of global capitalism which increasingly reduced the number of jobs in developed countries in order to seek cheaper employment in poorer parts of the world (Brine, 2006). Those promoting the idea of the knowledge society, on the other hand, argued that higher education and lifelong learning more generally could be used as the means of creating more stable and inclusive societies, with enhanced learning opportunities for all (see, for example, the European Commission's London Communiqué (2007)). The later years of the EU have been blighted by the economic crisis, which now threatens whatever progress had been made by 2007 in democratising access to higher education.

Lifelong learning and access to higher education in Europe have not only *evolved over* this period but have also been profoundly *shaped by* this history. This special issue explores aspects of the way in which access to higher education has evolved in Europe over this period. It draws in part on findings of a major research project, 'Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: the contribution of the education system' (LLL2010; EU 6th Framework Integrated Project; 2005-2011). The project involved eleven EU member states, together with Norway and Russia, and investigated various aspects of lifelong learning policy and practice, including higher education, adult education and workplace learning. Findings from the project are presented in two edited volumes (Riddell et al., 2012 and Saar et al., 2013). The potential of lifelong learning to promote social inclusion as well as economic growth in old and new member states was a major focus of the project. Two of the papers (Riddell and Weedon; Holford) present findings from, and arguments based on, a study carried out within LLL2010 relating to widening access to higher education and lifelong learning across Europe.

In addition to the papers based on the LLL2010 study, some of the papers draw on other research, including non-traditional routes into higher education across Europe (Orr

and Hovdhaugen); the role of the public university and moves towards the privatisation of higher education in England (Holmwood); an analysis of patterns of participation across the countries of the UK, with particular reference to ethnicity and social class (Croxford and Raffae); and an exploration of policy and practice on widening access in Scotland (Gallacher);.

The special issue considers the following questions:

- How do patterns of participation in higher education – considered from a perspective of social equity – vary across Europe? How do these patterns differ between old and new member states? What are the main trends in old and new member states?
- What approaches to widening participation have been adopted in different European countries and what lessons can be learnt from various experiences?
- Which groups are defined as under-represented in various countries and, of these, which have been encouraged to engage in widening participation initiatives?
- To what extent have widening access policies resulted in the reduction of social inequalities in access to higher education in different countries?
- Which social groups have been the major beneficiaries in different countries?
- If higher education is to counter rather than reinforce social inequality, what changes are needed and to what extent are these changes possible during the ongoing economic crisis which continues to threaten the economies of the developed world, including the US and Europe?

Cross-cutting themes

A number of themes weave through the papers, and in the following section we briefly review three of these.

Higher, education, social Europe and global capitalism

A number of papers refer to the optimism of the European Commission's London Communiqué, with its bold commitment to removing the link between social background and participation in higher education. It is probably not accidental that this document was drafted before the near-collapse of the European economic system, as a result of the crisis triggered by globalised financial services. Democratising access to higher education was intended to be one of the major ways in which European countries would become more prosperous and more equal, acting as a counter-balance to the tendency of multi-national capitalism to concentrate wealth in the hands of an increasingly restricted group of individuals and corporations. Whilst there has indeed been a rapid expansion in higher education participation across Europe, this has been accompanied by the growth of economic inequality. As noted by Holford and Riddell and Weedon in this special issue, the social dimension of the Bologna Process appears to have run aground, throwing into question the previous assumption that greater access to higher education would almost automatically produce more equal economic outcomes. Holford reflects on the possibility that the goals of social equality embedded within the Bologna process were never taken very seriously by European and national policy makers and therefore the lack of success in altering wealth distribution across Europe should come as no surprise.

There is some variation across Europe in the strength of the association between social class background and higher education participation, but the pattern of social inequality is broadly similar. The question therefore arises as to how much power individual countries have in bucking global trends with regard to the concentration of social elites

in the most prestigious institutions. Holmwood discusses the nature of higher education policy in England, which increasingly regards access to elite universities as a private good to be sold to the highest bidder. Croxford and Raffe draw an interesting contrast between England's market-led approach to higher education policy with the more social democratic approach of the devolved nations of the UK (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Their conclusion is that, despite efforts by the devolved nations to achieve greater social justice in higher education policy and practice, patterns of social inequality across the UK are quite similar. This suggests that the strength of competition for social advantage outweighs the efforts of national governments to promote greater social equality through domestic policy.

Higher education expansion, second chance routes and institutional differentiation

Papers by Orr and Hovdhaugen and Gallacher provide some insight into the processes which sustain the reproduction of social inequality through higher education. Discussing second chance routes into higher education in Sweden, Norway and Germany, Orr and Hovdhaugen highlight the considerable potential of these routes to produce more equal social outcomes, but also their limited success in practice. Sweden provides an interesting example of a country with a long tradition of lifelong learning, including participation by mature students in higher education after a period in the workplace. However, in 2006, a conservative coalition government withdrew the right to gain a place in a higher education institution on the basis of work experience, characterising this as 'unfair'. Similarly, in order to enhance the opportunity to enter higher education for students failing to gain appropriate upper secondary qualifications, an additional test of ability and aptitude was instituted (known as SweSAT). However, this test is now used mainly by students from more socially advantaged backgrounds to boost their qualifications, rather than by individuals from under-represented groups, the intended beneficiaries. These two examples indicate that Swedish efforts to diversify the social profile of higher education students have been eroded by the neo-liberal turn of social policy in a state which has been regarded as a custodian of social democratic principles.

Gallacher's paper also illuminates the way in which efforts to widen access to higher education in Scotland have been only partially successful due to a twin process of stratification and diversion. Whilst the higher education participation rate of 18 – 30 year olds has risen over the past two decades, people from poorer backgrounds are much more likely to be studying in colleges and post-92 institutions. Government-funded articulation routes between colleges and universities ensure that students progressing through a vocational route into higher education end up in post-92 institutions. These universities may be best placed to ensure that non-traditional students are successful in attaining a degree, but there are clearly social justice issues which need to be considered. A college course followed by a two year programme in a new university is much cheaper for the state to provide than education in an older university, so students from socially advantaged backgrounds are benefiting for much higher levels of state expenditure on their higher education. In addition, access to many of the professions is likely to require a degree from an old university and degrees from new universities generally lead to less well-paid employment. Students incur similar living costs irrespective of where they study and middle class parents are much more likely to be in a position to help their children financially whilst they are studying. This means that, across the UK, young people from poorer backgrounds may emerge from university with larger student loans but (at least in terms of earnings) less valuable degrees compared with their more socially advantaged peers. The Independent

Commission on Fees has noted that, since 2010, there has been a 40% reduction in the number of mature students entering higher education, probably reflecting a recognition that future earnings are unlikely to compensate for the amount of debt incurred.

Widening inequality, middle class anxiety and the position of low skilled workers

As noted by Brown et al. (2010), across Europe and the rest of the developed world there are insufficient highly paid professional jobs to meet rising demand. As a result, there is growing anxiety amongst middle class parents that their children will experience downward social mobility. This in turn leads to increased efforts on the part of middle class parents to ensure that their children have the right educational qualifications and social networks to ensure their place in the professional salaried class. In the case of the UK, despite the rising cost of private education, middle class parents continue to believe that these schools represent a sound investment, and research by Green et al. demonstrates that the private/state school wage differential has risen significantly over time. Whilst this may be of financial benefit to those who attend private schools, there is strong evidence that they contribute to growing economic and social inequality. As demonstrated by Raffe and Croxford (2013) students from private schools are over-represented in British elite universities. Boliver (2013) has demonstrated discrimination in the admissions process to Russell group universities, with students from state schools being less likely to obtain a place than their private school counterparts, even when they have similar grades in appropriate subjects. Middle class anxiety around the threat of downward social mobility is, of course, not unique to the UK. Orr and Hovdhaugen's paper in this special issue demonstrates the efforts by middle class parents to ensure that their offspring benefit from measures which were introduced to counter-balance existing social inequality in access to higher education.

Growing competition between social groups is not only driven by the restricted pool of high paying jobs, but also by the falling share of earnings and living standards of the majority. For example, in the UK, median earnings of British men fell between 2003 and 2008, whilst GDP increased by 11% over the same period. According to the UK Government's Office of Budget Responsibility projections, British wages will be lower in 2015 than they were in 2001, with a growing gap opening up between the richest in society and the rest. This trend is particularly marked in the US, where, in 1973, 5.4% of wage and salary income went to the top 1% of earners. By 2007, the share of earnings of the richest in society had almost doubled, with 12.2% of wage and salary income going to the top 1% (Parker, 2013). There are strong indications that European countries are being pulled along the same road that the US has already travelled down in terms of rising inequality, and it is also clear that access to elite higher education institutions is one of the principal factors driving the widening gap between the richest in society and the rest.

Overall, the papers in this special issue attempt to achieve a balance between optimism and pessimism with regard to the part which may be played by higher education in reducing social inequality and promoting social justice. Given the evidence to date across Europe, it is clear that there is a need to reassess the relationship between higher education participation and the distribution of social and economic goods. The Bologna Process, somewhat belatedly, emphasised the potential of higher education to contribute not only to economic prosperity but also to social justice and cohesion. Whilst there is clearly a thirst for higher education across Europe, it is evident that, to date, universities have tended to contribute to rising inequality by rationing access to the most

valuable qualifications. If higher education is to be a force for social change, then there is a need for a radical reappraisal of the social dimension of the Bologna Process.

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